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DOI:

[10.1016/j.jwb.2016.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2016.06.001)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Zhang, L. E., & Harzing, A-W. (2016). From dilemmatic struggle to legitimized indifference: Expatriates' host country language learning and its impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship. *JOURNAL OF WORLD BUSINESS*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2016.06.001>

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Journal of World Business

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jwb](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jwb)



# From dilemmatic struggle to legitimized indifference: Expatriates' host country language learning and its impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 9 May 2015

Received in revised form 27 May 2016

Accepted 3 June 2016

### Keywords:

Expatriate

Chinese

Learning

Host country employee

Host country language

## ABSTRACT

We address the lack of knowledge concerning the role of host country languages in multinational corporations based on an inductive qualitative study involving 70 interviews with Nordic expatriates and host country employees (HCE) in China. Building on the strongly discrepant views of expatriates and HCEs, we demonstrate how expatriates' willingness to learn and use the host country language lead to different types of expatriate-HCE relationships, ranging from harmonious to distant or segregated. In doing so, we emphasize the subtle and fragile connection between expatriates' attitude towards HCEs' mother tongue and trust formation in addition to the construction of superiority-inferiority relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

*Chinese tend to speak Chinese with each other, although we can all speak English. We just feel like speaking Chinese and don't feel like speaking English . . . We just find it weird to speak English. English is only spoken by foreigners. Why do Chinese people need to speak English? [A local employee]*

Multinational corporations (MNC) by definition operate in various host countries and communication with local partners takes place mostly in the host country language. Regardless of MNC's formal language policies, employees at MNC subsidiaries – be they local or foreign employees – thus cannot avoid being in contact with host country languages. Simultaneously using multiple languages, including the local language, and adapting to interlocutors according to the languages they speak are both common practices at MNC subsidiaries (Steyaert, Ostendorp, & Gaibrois, 2011). The use of local languages can be explained by a number of reasons, ranging from ethnocentrism, that is, the perceived importance of their own languages by local employees, to varied ability and inclination to engage in conversations in foreign languages (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013).

When we dive further into the daily language realities that employees in MNC subsidiaries face, one interesting yet under-researched phenomenon – as reflected in the opening quotation – emerges: the resistance of local employees to speaking a foreign language. In this case, a local Chinese manager strongly expressed that English is a language spoken by foreigners, whereas locals should speak Chinese. As the majority of MNC employees in foreign subsidiaries obviously speak the host country language as their mother tongue, and local business operations are largely conducted in the local language, it is not surprising that local employees demand to be able to speak their mother tongue. Such an action may be harmless and even helpful for business activities in MNC subsidiaries as organizations may have to choose a language that is “viewed favorably by the subsidiary employees” (Bordia & Bordia, 2015:417) when choosing a linguistic strategy for the MNC. However, it may create tension when there are expatriate employees who do not speak the local language. What can and will expatriates do when faced with host country employee (HCE) colleagues who are of the view that English is only for foreigners? Should expatriates resist or conform to the linguistic demands of the majority of subsidiary employees?

The current literature has studied various language challenges for HCEs: for example, how they grapple with a foreign functional language in their organizational activities (e.g. Brannen, 2004; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999) and whether and why they are willing to adopt a foreign language (e.g. Bordia & Bordia,

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2015; Peltokorpi & Vaara, 2012), as well as the consequences for them of using of the foreign language (e.g. Barner-Rasmussen & Aarnio, 2011). Yet HCEs' *resistance* (as opposed to willingness) to adopting a foreign language and particularly the resulting demands for expatriates' host country language learning has received scant attention in the International Business (IB) literature. Furthermore, we know very little about the consequences of expatriates' attitudes and actions towards host country language learning.

Prior research has also informed us that MNC's prioritization of a certain language through corporate language policies can lead to power differentials and a construction of superiority and inferiority among its employees (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). The corporate lingua franca can therefore be a considerable source of power for employees who speak it fluently (for a review see Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005). HCEs who lack such fluency can experience a loss of status (Neeley, 2013). However, there is often an assumption in the extant literature that expatriates tend to be fluent in the corporate lingua franca; therefore, the attention has been focused on situations where HCEs do not speak the corporate lingua franca or do not speak it fluently. Unavoidably, when HCEs resist using the corporate lingua franca and conduct conversations in their own mother tongue, expatriates who do not speak the host country language will be excluded. Such social exclusion may be further complicated by the fact that expatriates themselves may have different degrees of willingness to learn and adopt the host country language in different situations and have different levels of host country language proficiency at different stages of their assignments.

Our study addresses the research gaps identified above and thus extends our understanding of the realities of multilingualism in MNC subsidiaries, in particular of the necessity, likelihood and challenges involved in expatriates' attempts to learn and use the host country language. We further extend the understanding of the role that the host country language plays by examining how expatriates' attitudes towards their local employees' mother tongue may influence their relationships with their HCE colleagues. Specifically, our study thus aims to answer the following research question: What are the key factors that motivate or impede expatriates concerning learning the host country language, and how does expatriates' willingness or ambivalence regarding learning and using the host country language impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship in MNC subsidiaries? In answering this research question, we are careful to capture the often diverging viewpoints of both expatriates and HCEs.

By addressing this research question, we make the following contributions to the literature on language in IB, as well as to expatriate research more generally. First, by presenting the clearly discrepant views of HCEs and expatriates regarding the motivators and constraints that expatriates face in learning the host country language, we demonstrate the need to research expatriate-related phenomena from a host country perspective. Despite the fact that expatriates need support from HCEs in terms of acquiring local knowledge, facilitating local adaptation and achieving better task performance (Liu & Shaffer, 2005; Toh & Denisi, 2007), there is still a rather limited presence of HCEs' experiences, and host country perspectives in general, in expatriate research (e.g. Takeuchi, 2010). Theories on expatriate management have been predominantly developed from the expatriate perspective. Responding to the call to take other stakeholders into account when researching expatriates in MNC subsidiaries (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2005; Bordia & Bordia, 2015), we systematically incorporate the perspectives of both expatriates and HCEs in our study.

Second, we contribute to the understanding of the expatriate-HCE relationship through a host country language lens. Current literature has already shown that expatriates' *actual* host country language skills facilitate their communication with HCEs, foster trust between expatriates and HCEs, and make it possible for expatriates to share HCEs' local network (Welch et al., 2005; Varma, Pichler, Budhwar, Biswas, 2009; Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010). However, we do not yet know how expatriates' *willingness* to learn the local language might also significantly influence expatriates' relationship with their HCE colleagues. In our study, we therefore analyze expatriate-HCE relationships in detail, covering the following three scenarios: when expatriates are willing to learn, but do not (sufficiently) speak the host country language; when expatriates are willing to learn, and speak the local language; and when expatriates are not willing to learn, and thus do not speak the host country language.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we continue with a brief review of the prior literature, discussing the increasingly important role of the host country language in MNC subsidiaries, reviewing individuals' general motivation to learn a new language, and outlining how host country language skills influence the expatriate-HCE relationship. Subsequently, we present the methodology and findings, followed by a discussion of the conceptual and practical implications of our study, its limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Previous research on expatriates and host country language

### 2.1. The increasing pressure, motivators and constraints for expatriates to learn the host country language in MNC subsidiaries

The recent stream of research on language issues in IB has brought host country language to wider scholarly attention. For example, Feely and Harzing (2003) suggested that a mix of languages, including the host country language, might be one of the solutions to overcome language barriers between employees speaking different languages in MNCs. Harzing, Koster, and Magner (2011) further proposed code-switching, that is, the alternating use of two or more languages<sup>1</sup> (Auer, 2013) between employees' native languages and corporate language as one workable solution to improve communication efficiency, and showed that code-switching is likely to be seen as mainly positive in multilingual groups involving many different languages. Although these studies have not specifically proposed that expatriates in MNC subsidiaries are pressured to learn and use the host country language, such a message is rather obvious given the fact that expatriates are the only group of employees who do not speak the host country language as their mother tongue.

Moving beyond the Management literature, we draw upon second language learning theories to understand expatriates' learning of the host country language, although in sociolinguistics, second language acquisition and foreign language learning are two distinct areas of research. Scholars in social psychology and education have long emphasized the important role of motivation for successful second language learning (see Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Clément, 1990; for a review). Empirically, too, a lack of motivation has also been frequently reported as the most widely-mentioned barrier to learning another language (e.g. Eurobarometer, 2012). An individual's motivation to learn a second language is sustained by attitudes toward the second language

<sup>1</sup> In sociolinguistics, code-switching could be based on the alternation not only of languages, but also of dialects, styles, prosodic registers, paralinguistic cues, etc., which are all "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1982, 1992). For the purpose of this paper, we refer to code-switching as the alternation of languages (Auer, 2013).

community and the goals pursued during the process of learning the second language (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972). With regard to constraints for second language acquisition, foreign language anxiety, that is, a feeling of uneasy suspense when learning a foreign language (Rachman, 1998), has been identified as a powerful and negative predictor for language learning results (Horwitz, 2001). However, this stream of literature mainly examines children and students instead of skilled employees in work situations. Furthermore, in most foreign language learning contexts, learners have little access and exposure to the target language. They also typically have a different purpose for language learning, such as to meet school requirements or to find better future jobs (Liu & Huang, 2011). This is a very different situation from expatriates' learning of the host country language, which tends to happen mostly in the destination country and is related to *current* job demands. Likewise, the close links between host country language skills and employment opportunities proposed in the research literature on immigrants (see e.g. Chiswick & Miller, 1992; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003) are not as relevant for company-initiated expatriation.

Our review of these separate streams of literature thus suggests that there is a gap in our knowledge on how and why employees are motivated to learn a second language and what the constraints – if any – might be. The first part of our research question therefore asks what the key factors are that motivate or impede expatriates regarding learning the host country language, and whether host country employees share expatriates' views on these factors.

## 2.2. The impact of host country language skills on the expatriate-HCE relationship

Without strong host country language skills, expatriates are constrained in their development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships with HCEs (Welch et al., 2005). Research has shown that the impact of expatriates' host country language skills on the establishment of a successful expatriate-HCE relationship is evidenced in two areas. First, host country language skills influence expatriates' **interaction** with HCEs (Peltokorpi, 2010): if their host country language proficiency is low, expatriates need to rely on HCE translators. These HCE translators might, however, engage in gate-keeping behavior, manage the information flow, change or filter the contents, or even twist the intent of the message (Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen, & Vesa, 2013). Hence, expatriates without host country language skills are dependent on HCE translators for their daily interactions in the subsidiary (Selmer & Lauring, 2015), thus leading to mediated and moderated interaction between expatriates and HCEs. Without at least *some* knowledge of the host country language, expatriates are also likely to have difficulty understanding HCEs' variations in pronouncing and using English. This is especially true in host countries such as China, where most members of the local staff learn English from teachers whose mother tongue is Chinese<sup>2</sup> and thus speak English with a distinct Chinese-influenced accent. In contrast, expatriates who can interact directly with HCEs in the local language can manage their relationships in a more controlled and predictable manner. In such cases, expatriates' host country language skills become one of the potentially defining factors for managing a successful expatriate-HCE relationship.

Second, expatriates' host country language skills may further influence the **trust** between expatriates and HCEs. Trust, "the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the

basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another" (McAllister, 1995:25), has been established in the literature as a social lubricant which can smooth social interactions (Arrow, 1974). Language, the immediate carrier of culture, and language barriers influence the relevance of information upon which people establish their trust (e.g., Levin, Whitener, & Cross, 2006; Schoorman, Mayer & Davis, 2007; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2013). Trustors base their judgments on information such as demographic similarity, which includes the languages the trustee speaks (Levin et al., 2006). Generally speaking, individuals are more attracted to and willing to trust those who are socially similar to them within a certain culture (Byrne, 1971). Admittedly, social similarity may not necessarily translate across cultures, and different aspects of similarity/difference may have different priorities in different societies. Given the existing differences between HCEs and expatriates in apparent physical cues, such as skin and hair color, the additional language difference will increase the salience of nationality and ethnicity. Consequentially, this will increase the likelihood that HCEs categorize expatriates who do not speak the host country language, or speak it poorly, as outgroup members and thus trust them less (Toh & Denisi, 2007). The antecedents and benefits of trust, and the consequences of mistrust, have been extensively researched over the past few decades (Schoorman et al., 2007). However, the specific role of language, and in particular the host country language, as a mechanism for increasing HCEs' trust in expatriates and thus contributing to a more successful expatriate-HCE relationship has not yet been examined in detail.

Our review above thus explicates that expatriates' host country language skills have a significant impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship. However, we do not know whether expatriates' *willingness* to learn the host country language also influences their relationship with HCEs. Host country language learning is usually a long process requiring considerable financial investment from MNCs, and effort and time from expatriates (Selmer, 2006). As it also often takes place at the workplace in MNC subsidiaries, the actual activity of expatriates' language learning (i.e. their willingness to learn the host country language) might already influence how HCEs perceive expatriates. The second part of our research question will thus look at the influence of both expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language and their actual host country language proficiency on the expatriate-HCE relationship.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Setting and research design

In order to develop an in-depth understanding of this relatively unexplored area, we adopted an empirical contextualization strategy (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010) in this study. This means that the research context, such as the characteristics of the host country language, is relevant to the conceptualization process. We conducted our study among Nordic expatriates in China for three reasons: first, Nordic nationals are known for being able to speak one or more foreign languages due to the fact that their native languages are not spoken widely outside their home countries. According to Eurobarometer (2012), 91% of the respondents in Sweden and 75% of the respondents in Finland claimed that they were able to speak at least one language in addition to their mother tongue, and "using a new language at work" was frequently mentioned as a reason for learning the language. Nordic countries are also known for having a high percentage of their nationals working abroad. For example, in the 1990s a total of 1.2 million Finnish citizens were living and working outside Finland, and another 600,000 had at least one parent born in Finland (Koivukangas, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> We use "Chinese" to refer to Mandarin and all possible dialects the local employees speak, as strictly speaking, Mandarin Chinese is only the mother tongue of native Chinese living in Beijing and a few provinces in Northeast China (Li, 2004).



Second, Chinese has become an increasingly important language globally, including in Europe, as a result of the recent economic boom in China. In 2012, while 20% of the respondents considered French and German to be useful for the future of their children, as many as 14% of the respondents considered Chinese to be useful (Eurobarometer, 2012). The belief that Chinese is important has become significantly more widespread recently; in 2005 only 2% of the respondents subscribed to this statement. Admittedly, Chinese has been viewed as a difficult foreign language for Europeans, mostly because of its different phonetic and writing systems. There are five tones in Mandarin Chinese: one neutral tone, one level tone and three contour tones, whereas English is an atonal language (Chung, McBride-Chang, Cheung, & Wong, 2013). Chinese words may be spelled out the same way in Pinyin, the standard system of Romanized spelling for transliterating Chinese, but they have different meanings when pronounced in different tones. Chinese has also been considered to be more challenging to learn because it is hard for Europeans to find common features between Chinese and their mother tongues, whereas European languages share many similarities. However, there is a great degree of diversity and difference among European languages. For example, Finnish, a Uralic language, shares no more similarities with non-Uralic languages, for example German, than with Chinese. Therefore, it is linguistically not grounded to argue that it would be easier for Finnish-speakers to learn German than Chinese.

Third, China has been identified as one of the top destinations for international assignments—and also as one of the most challenging destinations, with the highest failure rate in the world (Brookfield, 2014). Language differences have been listed as one of the key challenges for expatriates in China. Thus, our empirical context of Nordic expatriates in China is particularly suitable for studying the role of host country language skills in MNC subsidiaries.

### 3.2. Data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 32 expatriates and 38 HCEs in 13 Nordic MNC subsidiaries in China over the periods 2006–2007 and 2012–2013. The industries in which these MNC subsidiaries operate are, for example, telecommunications, process manufacturing, clean technology, and minerals and metal processing. Interviews in 2006–2007 were conducted in both the Beijing and Shanghai area, whereas interviews in 2012–2013 were conducted only in the Beijing area. We asked interviewees to describe their experiences of interacting with their close expatriate or local colleagues, as well as their opinions about whether and why the host country language was difficult to learn for expatriates. We also asked both expatriates and HCEs to provide examples of their communication experiences with each other. The first author, fluent in English, Chinese, and Finnish conducted the majority of the interviews in one or more of these three languages.

A multilingual approach (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004) was adopted during the interviews, and the use of specific languages was adjusted according to the situation. For example, occasionally part of the interview with HCEs was conducted in English when the HCE interviewees wanted to demonstrate that they were capable of working in English. In a similar vein, sometimes part of the interview with expatriates was conducted in Chinese when the expatriate interviewee was eager to prove their Chinese language skills. The majority of the interviews with expatriates were nevertheless conducted in English, and the majority of the interviews with HCEs were conducted in Chinese. Interviews were primarily conducted at the workplace, in an area where the interviews could not be overheard. We recorded and

transcribed all interviews with the agreement of the respondents. As with our approach in conducting the interviews, our interview transcriptions were also in three languages, that is, English, Chinese and Finnish. We kept the original codes in the language of the interview for as long as possible before translating them all into English. Interview duration ranged between 50 min and 100 min, with an average duration of 63 min. In order to preserve the originality of interviewees' language use, spelling and grammar mistakes were not corrected in the transcription process. Only one of the 32 expatriates interviewed was female, whereas 11 of the HCEs were female.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted as an iterative process. First, we identified recurrent themes across transcripts and made sense of the themes and their connections (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002), for example whether expatriates considered it useful to learn the host country language and whether HCEs shared the same views, and how expatriates were motivated or discouraged to learn the host country language. We then grouped the interview data under these themes using an open coding technique (Charmaz, 2010; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001) and developed broad categories, such as the rationale and motivation for language learning. For example, an expatriate said: *"I was on the high position in Beijing. And Chinese language is only an asset in Beijing and all the management above me, nobody in the management above me talk in any more Chinese than I do. So for them it's not anything that I spoke Chinese. They didn't seem to speak it at all, so why would they promote me?"* We coded this as "Expatriate's lack of motivation to learn the host country language because it is not directly related to promotion".

As we continued coding more interview transcripts, we incorporated newly emergent subcategories into the coding map and adjusted some of the codes accordingly. For example, codes about how the lack of host country language skills contributed to social exclusion at work were based on quotes such as the following: *"When they [expatriates] are present, we all have to speak English. But we only speak in English when there are issues concerning him [expatriate colleague]. For those issues that are irrelevant to him, we talk in Chinese."* These codes were then grouped together under higher-order code "Segregated expatriate-HCE relationship". We coded and categorized the transcripts until each category contained several subcategories and a conceptual framework had emerged from the coding map. All codes and categories were iteratively adapted during the coding process.

During the coding process, we also constantly moved between empirical data and existing research on expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language and its impact on expatriate-HCE relationship (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The constant comparison of new categories emerging from the data and existing concepts ensured that the final conceptual framework of this study was based on rigorous analysis. The conceptual framework inductively built in this study is therefore both grounded in the data as well as guided by existing concepts and frameworks. As our interviewees constantly referred to obstacles to learning the host country language at various levels, ranging from their personal physical exhaustion to the host country ideology toward expatriates and the foreign population in general, we classified motivators and impediments for language learning into individual, organizational and national levels.

We concluded the coding process when we felt that the coding map that had emerged had addressed all aspects of the research question in this study. This process also involved constant traveling between the interview data, existing theory and our research question (Corley & Gioia, 2004). For example, although it was clear that the accounts provided by HCEs provided important insights

into expatriates' attitudes towards learning of the host country language, we only discovered the detailed influencing patterns of HCEs at all levels (individual, organizational and national) in the final conclusion-drawing phase. Such discoveries were also the result of constant discussion and questioning of the codes and categories between the two authors, who had different types of prior knowledge of the phenomenon researched.

## 4. Findings

In response to our research question, we first examine the contrasting opinions of expatriates and HCEs concerning the key factors that motivate or impede expatriates in learning the host country language. Subsequently, we explain how these responses influence expatriate-HCE relationships, proposing three distinct types of relationship depending on the expatriates' willingness to learn and use the host country language.

### 4.1. Motivators and constraints in learning the host country language: discrepant views from expatriates and HCEs

Our analysis suggested that expatriates and HCEs held contrasting views regarding the motivators and constraints for expatriates regarding learning and speaking the host country language at the workplace. In the following section, these discrepancies are discussed in detail, divided into the different levels at which the motivators and constraints occur: the individual, organizational and national levels. Table 1 provides a summary of these contrasting views with supporting empirical evidence from the interviews.

#### 4.1.1. Individual factors: learning motivation, workload, and superior-inferior relationship

Expatriates and HCEs reacted differently towards individual factors influencing expatriates' learning of the host country language, such as expatriates' learning motivation, expatriates' workload and a superior-inferior relationship between expatriates and HCEs. Most expatriates in our study wanted to learn the host country language because they believed that competence in the local language would benefit their current work in China and future career in general. They therefore took a 'functional' approach and treated the learning of the host country language as instrumental: "It seems that China is becoming very powerful in the world. I don't think it's a waste of time to learn Chinese. You will need it anywhere in the world pretty soon" [E8b]. HCEs, on the other hand, held the belief that such an instrumental and immediate gain could not be a 'real' motivation. HCEs responded negatively towards expatriates' 'opportunistic' approach towards learning the HCEs' mother tongue, a language which HCEs took pride in speaking. They did not believe that expatriates were really committed to learning Chinese. Some HCEs believed that it was useless for expatriates to learn Chinese with an instrumental approach because the contextualized knowledge encoded in the Chinese language is an essential part of the language learning: "I don't think expatriates' learning of Chinese is of much help to their work in China. The reason is that I don't believe he can learn the meanings beyond the words" [H2b].

In terms of how much time their workload allowed expatriates to devote to the learning of the local language, expatriates and HCEs also held different views. Expatriates felt that it was challenging to set aside time to study the host country language, as their work environment was stressful and hectic. Many commented that they were exhausted by the long working hours and did not feel that there was any time left outside work for language study: "Even though I know that it would be huge asset to be able to speak Chinese, at least to understand what people are saying,

then I just haven't been able to find the time for it" [E2b]. HCEs, on the other hand, commented that lack of time was only an 'excuse', used to mask expatriates' lack of any real motivation to study Chinese. In their opinion, everyone in the MNC subsidiaries had hectic working schedules, including HCEs themselves.

The strongly discrepant views of expatriates and HCEs regarding expatriates' 'real' and 'right' motivation for learning HCEs' mother tongue were further complicated by a superior-inferior expatriate-HCE relationship at work. Expatriates felt that interacting frequently with HCEs in the host country language could potentially lower their authority. For example, an expatriate commented: "When you want to be authoritative, it's good to keep a distance [to HCEs] by speaking English" [E10b]. Sometimes, expatriates felt obliged to speak some Chinese with their local clients in order to create trust for future business development, but they considered speaking Chinese to be a 'showcase'. In a similar vein, HCEs had the impression that expatriates felt superior to them because expatriates normally did not make much effort to communicate with them in Chinese. In their opinion, expatriates' willingness to speak Chinese was exclusively reserved for important local clients: "He (expatriate colleague) only speaks Chinese in order to get closer to our client. He doesn't speak Chinese with us . . . He only says a few things funny in Chinese, as jokes for clients. He doesn't have the will to really learn Chinese" [H13b]. Expatriates' ambivalence concerning learning and speaking the host country language was perceived by HCEs as a general reflection of their feeling of superiority towards the locals.

#### 4.1.2. Organizational factors: corporate language, internal position hierarchy, and assignment duration

Expatriates and HCEs also reacted differently towards organizational factors influencing expatriates' learning of the host country language. Most of the MNCs in this study had adopted English as the official corporate language, believing that the *lingua franca* would solve the challenges caused by employees speaking different native languages. There was thus no emphasis on expatriates' proficiency in the host country language either before or during expatriation. Consequently, the expatriates did not have a compelling reason to study Chinese. They considered it to be 'routine' for everyone to speak in the corporate *lingua franca*. The expatriates were confident that somehow it would always work out without them learning to speak the host country language: "There are people who can speak English, I could go there (paper mill) by myself, even I didn't speak Chinese. Just to talk with people there, in the control room. There are always some people who can speak some words of English" [E5a]. On the other hand, the HCEs tended to complain that MNC headquarters kept sending expatriates who did not speak any Chinese to China. They appreciated expatriates who could speak the host country language, with whom they could communicate in their native language.

Furthermore, expatriates in general held higher-level positions than HCEs, and they considered it acceptable for them to seek language-related assistance from their HCE colleagues. Therefore, expatriates considered it 'legitimate' to rely on HCEs to provide translation services. The HCEs, however, expressed discontent toward this expectation. HCE interviewees with expatriate supervisors were not satisfied with the amount of translation they needed to do in addition to their normal daily tasks. However, they usually had to comply with expatriate supervisors' requests due to their respective positions in the organizational hierarchy.

The third factor constraining expatriates' learning of the host country language was the temporary nature of their expatriate assignments. In this regard, the expatriates and HCEs shared similar views—the HCEs sympathized with expatriates who were not able improve their Chinese language skills as a result of the uncertainty surrounding the duration of their assignment in China.

**Table 1**  
Constraints for learning the host country language: discrepant views from expatriates and HCEs.

	Constraints	Expatriate vs HCE	Illustrative examples
Individual	Learning motivation	Functional ≈ Opportunistic	And then the reason to choose me, yeah, I think because, you know, the language skills and it's kind of good that I have been in that company for a few years. [E10b] My boss, for example, is very pragmatic [ . . . ] he doesn't speak any Chinese. He is only interested in projects which can have an impact within his three years' expatriation period. [H5b]
	Workload during expatriation	Exhausting ≈ Normal	[I have a] very long working day and [I am] exhausted already after work, like 10 hours per day, and sometimes [work] during the weekend [ . . . ] I haven't even tried to remember the characters, but I don't think it's difficult. It just needs some more effort [and] time. [E7b] Foreigners living in China are rather free. He drinks and entertains himself. We Chinese still need to accompany families after having finally finished a long working day. [H12b]
	The superior-inferior work relationship	Insensitive ≈ Sensitive	We are supposed to be the foreigners. It's bit of your role, also if you come, kind of a senior, let's say have a customer meeting, [you] need to be there, need to sit there in the middle, other guys they do their thing, and you are supposed to be there to show face, and, you know, be nice and maybe say something [in English]. Yeah, it's ok and they translate. And then if you can say a few words, a few polite things in Chinese, and then they are utterly happy. [E3b] Another thing is that maybe at the bottom of their hearts, they don't think Chinese are as capable as them. They won't think that all the things you gave him are qualified or [not]. I don't know what this word should be. But they either show too much confidence or they look down upon Chinese. [H2a]
Organizational	English as the corporate <i>lingua franca</i>	Routinized ≈ Questionable	The company policy is that, it's a company culture and policy is that the company language is English. So it's quite important, and that's how it is. [E3b] English is our foreign language. We like speaking in Chinese. In meetings, Chinese like to discuss their opinions in Chinese. [H24b]
	Expatriates hold higher positions	Legitimate ≈ Dissatisfying	We thought our Finnish connection gives [this office in China] something special. Like a senior advisor. [E18b] In theory, I only work for him (an expatriate) eight hours a day. However if you do not help him, he will be in a difficult situation. [H11b]
	Fixed-term expatriation contract	Suffering = Sympathizing	I renewed it [expatriation contract] like three times. I had a background in the languages. But here I was struggling. I thought that I was the one guy who would learn Chinese, and I didn't. So I am kind of shamed myself that I have been here for six and half years, but I gave up. But it happens to many of us, including me, when you get close to the end of your contract, you stopped learning, because it doesn't make sense any more. Your contract is ending. But then it's renewed. Then it's only one year's extension. I don't start to learn. And this kind of excuse happens every year and in the end you don't learn. [E5b] They [expatriates] don't necessarily think that there is no need to learn Chinese because we are a foreign company. For many people, they are sent here under a contract with limited time duration. He would think that I would be home anyway after two or three years. Anyway I can't learn the language, even if I try. Maybe it's better not to waste time. My work is anyway quite busy. [H11b]
National	Linguistic nationalism	Worrisome ≈ Entitled	The negative nationalism is rising in China in my opinion, very fast. That's something that is a little bit shocking to me. I would think that Chinese would get more international and get used to foreigners living in China. But instead there is a little bit of violence somehow. [E5b] Their [local partner's] top manager is very fluent in English. But we still need to translate it into Chinese and present it in Chinese to him. This is about image or the interplay of strong and weak. [H4b]

In most MNCs in this study, the standard duration for expatriation was limited to a maximum of four to five years. Normally, the first expatriate assignment was two years with the possibility of renewing it once. The short expatriation duration did not motivate the expatriates to start investing time in learning the host country language since they did not know when they would return to the MNC headquarters or be transferred to another MNC subsidiary with a different host country language.

#### 4.1.3. National factor: linguistic nationalism

At the national level, expatriates and HCEs also viewed expatriates' learning of the host country language differently. Such differences were reflected in the different reactions from expatriates and HCEs toward nationalism based on the host country language, that is, linguistic nationalism (see Anderson, 1983; Von Busekist, 2006). Expatriates felt an increasing level of linguistic nationalism among Chinese employees at MNC subsidiaries. Despite the fact that there was a shared understanding that English should be the corporate language, Chinese was used in a wide range of settings, and expatriates were frequently

excluded from conversations. As a result, expatriates felt frustrated and discouraged to try learning the host country language.

On the other hand, HCEs in the MNC subsidiaries felt “entitled” to show their vigorous support for their mother tongue. Many HCEs were indifferent towards the challenges expatriates faced through lack of competence in the host country language. They questioned the fairness of not being able to speak their own native language when working in their own country, although they understood that it was not realistic for all expatriates in MNC subsidiaries to learn the host country language. The HCEs emphasized their instinctive need to speak Chinese—“Chinese tend to forget about the *laowai* [foreigner] and cannot always help but speak in Chinese. I do not think we have the ‘concept’ of speaking English to foreigners” [H8b].

Our results thus clearly indicate the contrasting opinions of expatriates and HCEs concerning the key factors that motivate or impede expatriates in learning the host country language. In the next section, we explain how these responses influence expatriate-HCE relationships, proposing three distinct types of relationship depending on the expatriates' willingness to learn the language and their actual proficiency.



## 4.2. Impact on the expatriate-HCE relationship

Expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language and their actual proficiency in the local language clearly influenced expatriate-HCE relationships. HCEs reacted differently towards expatriates depending on the situation. When they saw that the expatriates had made an effort to learn the local language and showed appreciation of the local culture by attempting to speak the language, HCEs were more accepting towards their expatriate colleagues. For example, such situations were evidenced when expatriates took private language classes at workplace and when they enthusiastically mixed a few local words in their conversations with HCEs. Below we describe how the different reactions of expatriates and HCEs lead to different types of expatriate-HCE relationship.

### 4.2.1. When expatriates were willing to learn, and felt confident adopting the host country language: a harmonious expatriate-HCE relationship

When expatriates engaged in more conversation with HCEs in the host country language, the HCEs responded very positively. HCEs appreciated that expatriates were willing to compromise and learn the HCEs' mother tongue. It helped to create a more relaxed work atmosphere. By seeing their expatriate colleagues take Chinese lessons in the offices of MNC subsidiaries, the HCEs could feel in a concrete sense that expatriates were investing time in learning their mother tongue, despite the expatriates' hectic workload. One HCE mentioned cheerfully during the interview that "They all have Chinese lessons. And they all want to 'show'<sup>3</sup> a few words in Chinese immediately after each Chinese lesson!" [E1a]. This particular HCE's expatriate supervisor was especially proud in telling us that he had 'strategically' hired a personal assistant whose English was not very good, so that he could practice speaking Chinese.

Expatriates' willingness to learn and use the host country language was also interpreted as a gesture of good intentions to include more HCE participation in daily activities at MNC subsidiaries. The HCEs were much more forthcoming and active in group discussions when they could express their views freely in their native language. In the HCEs' opinions, meetings conducted in the host country language were much more efficient, as the frequency of repeating and confirming between the expatriates and HCEs was significantly reduced.

*Chinese staff would have more ideas and comments if they can discuss in Chinese. I have noticed that the same person's activeness is completely different during English and Chinese-speaking occasions. [H7b]*

Although only a small percentage of the expatriates in our study were able to follow work-oriented discussions in the host country language, some chose to let the HCEs discuss issues in their native language first and asked for a brief summary as basis of decision-making later on.

*So what I usually do is I come and open a meeting, I said that ok it's what I want your guys to do. [ . . . ] And now I gonna leave and you can discuss with your native language and you got work it out . . . because I know that, you know, sometimes they get for sure better result if they can discuss in Chinese. [E2b]*

Such practices were well received by the HCEs, as they felt more involved and felt their opinions were appreciated for business decisions in their own company. Speaking the HCEs' native

language clearly indicated that expatriates appreciated their local employees.

*I want to integrate even better into the Chinese society and the work community here. I want to understand China and Chinese and Chinese people. I think it doesn't hurt to have some basic understanding of the language. [ . . . ] I definitely want to learn Chinese. That's not the main drive, but it shows my commitment to China and our business in China and to my colleagues that I am taking it seriously. I am not here to visit, but I want to integrate. [E18b]*

Speaking the host country language also created closer interpersonal relationships and fostered more trust between expatriates and HCEs, which was essential for business development and managing the HCEs. One expatriate reflected upon his experience of engaging in a conversation with one of his subordinates for an unpleasant confrontation about office rumors:

*These things are harder if you have to go by another person because talking about private issues like that; it's alright, it's alright when it comes to talking directly with me, but there is, like, translator there might be an assistant or something. She would have to trust both me and the assistant. You know that's harder than trust just one person when it's these private things, because it takes quite a bit of establishing a relationship, sort of open heart to you. [E10b]*

Furthermore, when the expatriates met MNCs' local clients together with their HCE colleagues, the expatriates' willingness to speak the host country language made them look like good team players when negotiating with their external local partners. One HCE observed: "As soon as there are Chinese words jumping out of his mouth, our Chinese clients feel very surprised and feel that the relationship is closer" [H13b].

### 4.2.2. When expatriates were willing to learn, but could or would not speak the host country language: a distant expatriate-HCE relationship

When expatriates showed they were willing to learn the host country language, but were either not proficient or confident enough to use it, the likelihood of nurturing a trustful expatriate-HCE relationship was reduced. HCEs had a clear opinion, doubting that expatriates would be very committed to learn the local language. For example, one HCE commented: "It depends on whether they (i.e. expatriates) have Chinese wife. Otherwise they will only go to 'study' (i.e. only taking up the action of learning) [ . . . ] but they will never use Chinese, [H1b]" when asked whether he had noticed that his expatriate colleagues worked diligently on learning Chinese.

As a result, HCEs tended to conclude that their foreign colleagues were not motivated in learning their language after all if they could not see any concrete result, that is, expatriates' use of the local language in the long term. Another HCE said: "Unless his wife is Chinese, he will unavoidably have to get in touch with us Chinese. Otherwise their circle only consists of Finns" [H8b].

Existing research has pointed out that expatriates' host country language skills can help them gain trust from their colleagues outside the MNC headquarters (e.g. Welch et al., 2005), and the reverse seems to be also true as, in our study, we found that a lack of host country language proficiency created a key barrier for expatriates in achieving trust from locals.

*It is very difficult to build up social relations. You can't make a telephone call. So this is really a big thing for me. You don't build up the connections; expatriates, persons who don't speak Chinese and who will never will, to that extent, can't pick up the phone and call somebody. [E6a]*

Another expatriate commented on the challenge of leading a factory without being able to speak to everyone: "You know when

<sup>3</sup> A single quotation mark is used here to indicate that the English word "show" (instead of its translation in Chinese) was used by this interviewee.



you manage a production area, if you can't talk to people on the floor, it's a problem" [E10a]. Expatriates without host country language proficiency had no means to build up relationships with local business partners who did not speak any English, as commented on by one expatriate: "Very often, I meet this Chinese person and it [the meeting] is just translated to me [...] by my Chinese colleagues because I cannot speak Chinese" [E18b]. The expatriates' colleagues introduced local contacts to them, but it was difficult to maintain the relationship afterward. Many expatriates expressed the frustration of not knowing whom they had met after a social event. They were left with a bunch of business cards with names in Chinese characters, but had no clue of their pronunciation or how they related to the people they had met.

Not being able to speak the host country language also reduced expatriates' trust in their direct HCE reports. Expatriates often felt insecure when relying totally upon their direct HCE reports for information. These direct reports were language linchpins, individuals who translated the business transaction from one language to the other (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). Linchpins often reported according to their own interpretations and perspectives. Consequently, it was challenging for expatriate managers to discover whether their immediate subordinates told the truth or not and whether all relevant information had been reported back. Expatriates frequently suspected that more information in Chinese should have been translated and reported back to them. One HCE complained that expatriates were overly sensitive toward conversations in the host country language: "My impression is that when a group of Chinese gathers together talking a lot, sometimes there are some English words. When the foreign boss picks up some [Chinese] words, he would [mistakenly] think that this discussion is related to him" [H4a]. When expatriates could only understand a small part of the whole conversation, there was a greater tendency toward misunderstanding, which might have led to their jumping to the conclusion that their HCE colleagues were intentionally excluding them.

The expatriate-HCE relationship was therefore distant without the possibility of deeper relationship building and trust formation in the HCEs' mother tongue. Such a relationship could also be described as a "neutral one", as HCEs could not blame expatriates for not having tried to acknowledge the dominant presence of HCEs, or show appreciation of the local culture. HCEs could see expatriates' efforts to learn Chinese, and they sympathized to some extent with expatriates who could not speak much Chinese yet, as there was a commonly shared belief among HCEs themselves that Chinese is a difficult language. As we will see in the next section, however, HCEs' reactions towards expatriates were rather different when they did not see any willingness or effort from the expatriates' side.

#### 4.2.3. When expatriates are not willing to learn: a segregated expatriate-HCE relationship

When HCEs had the impression that their expatriate colleagues did not care about learning their mother tongue, they felt little sense of guilt when excluding expatriates from the conversation because of language. Those expatriates who did not understand Chinese were often at loss about what was discussed. They often felt helpless in attempting to follow the discussions, while the HCEs considered it to be justified to exclude expatriates who were not willing to learn the host country language. The expatriates sensed the exclusion by the HCEs, and occasionally they protested by leaving the meetings.

*For some reason, everybody just speaks Chinese, or switch through the meeting into Chinese. You might start something in English, but they just you know ok and then they continue (it in Chinese), and then you realize that now they don't actually want me, and then sometimes if that happens, I just walk out. [E3b]*

When expatriates did not demonstrate interest in or commitment to learning Chinese, the HCEs became suspicious and guarded towards expatriates. Some HCEs also showed contempt towards expatriates as they did not like the fact that expatriates did not appreciate their mother tongue, which to them was an immediate and direct symbol of their home country.

*He (expatriate) has never studied it (Chinese), although there are free classes provided by the company [...] He seems to understand many things though. However, he cannot learn the positive side of Chinese. Instead, he picked up the bad habits of Chinese. [H5b]*

The HCEs were aware of the segregation between expatriates and local employees as a result of languages spoken at workplaces. However, they did not seem to be concerned that expatriates might drift further apart from the majority of employees at MNC subsidiaries. Instead the HCEs accepted the new routine that their foreign colleagues were not interacting with them.

*Maybe because we talk too much in Chinese, they can't follow us. So gradually they don't want to be with us. It's very interesting. If we go out to eat in one table, usually foreigners are sitting together. [H3a]*

The fact that expatriates did not show a willingness to learn the HCEs' mother tongue contributed to the HCEs' feeling of insecurity, inferiority and dissatisfaction towards expatriates, as discussed in Section 4.1.1. This further led the HCEs to be guarded in their behavior toward expatriates, such as keeping silent when having differing opinions and pretending to agree with expatriates while they actually disagreed strongly. The expatriate-HCE relationship therefore became segregated, regardless of whether HCEs had some sympathy towards expatriates or not.

Compared with the previously discussed distant expatriate-HCE relationship, the segregated expatriate-HCE relationship is the result of a much stronger HCE reaction in the form of disappointment and dissatisfaction. They also sensed that expatriates felt superior, reflected in their ignoring of the local presence in the subsidiary and a lack of appreciation of the local culture. A segregated relationship on a regular and systematic basis between expatriates and HCEs indicated that there were significant challenges in terms of socialization for expatriates. With expatriates spontaneously walking out of important meetings, HCEs being cynical and critical of expatriates, and expatriates and HCEs acting guardedly towards each other, this segregated relationship caused great harm to both groups, as well as to MNC subsidiaries in general.

## 5. Discussion

We put forward a theoretical model (Fig1.) explaining how expatriates and HCEs differ in terms of their views on the motivations and impediments for expatriates concerning learning the host country language, and how differences in willingness to learn the host country language and host country language proficiency may induce different types of expatriate-HCE relationship, ranging from harmonious to distant or segregated.

#### 5.1. Contextualization of second language acquisition among expatriates

Our study's findings contribute to our understanding of the motivational factors and impediments in second language acquisition by extending knowledge from student samples to actual work settings. This prior knowledge was derived mainly from quantitative studies, using relatively simplistic motivation constructs. Our findings suggest that expatriates' learning of the

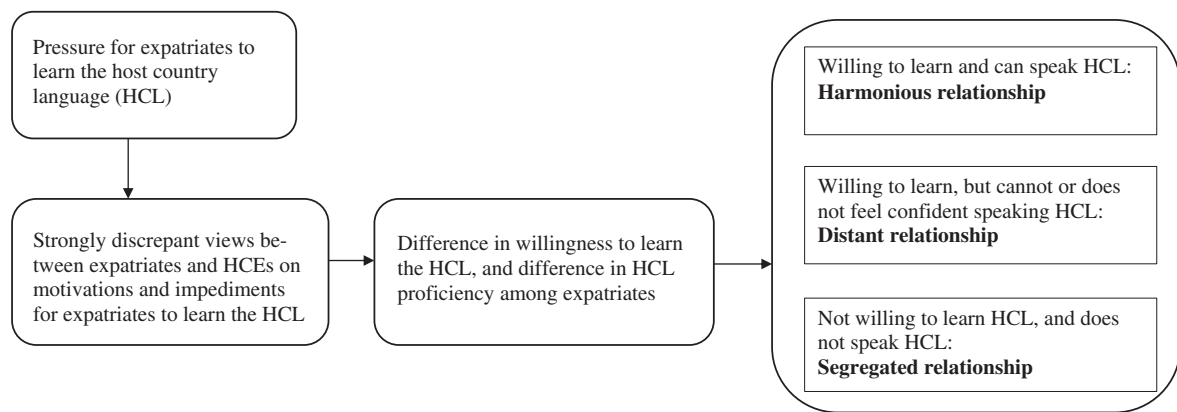


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

host country language differs significantly from that of children, students, and immigrants in terms of the relevant motivational factors, learning intensity, and the presence of expectations from a third party (i.e. the HCE). Work dominates the learning environment of expatriates' learning of a host country language. It influences whether and to what degree one's host country language skill is needed for coping with work in the MNC headquarters versus subsidiaries; how much time one may be able to set aside for learning a new language outside work, and whether one can devote oneself to learning on a regular basis; and finally whether or not one's colleagues expect language learning to take place. The relationship between expatriates' host country language skills and their social and economic status in the host country is also not as closely related as it is for immigrants. In our inductively built process model, we have taken into consideration the contextual characteristics of expatriates' learning of the host country language and included the perspectives of both expatriates themselves and their HCE colleagues.

The first part of our model highlighted the need for expatriates to learn the host country language, an area that thus far has received insufficient scholarly attention in IB (Bordia & Bordia, 2015; Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999). However, learning a new language during adulthood, and especially in conjunction with work, can be challenging. As illustrated by the left-hand section of our model (and presented in detail in Table 1), there are strongly discrepant views between expatriates and HCEs on the motivations and impediments for expatriates regarding learning the host country language. Our results showed that there are various factors, ranging from the individual through the organizational to the national level, which constrain expatriates and limit the time and effort they can invest in learning the host country language.

At the individual level, expatriates were demotivated to learn the host country language because of the heavy workload during expatriation, though this was considered to be only a convenient excuse by HCEs. HCEs also considered the expatriates' motivation to learn the host country language only to the level required for coping with the practicalities of working in the host country to be opportunistic. HCEs further doubted expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language as they felt that expatriates saw themselves as superior to them. At the organizational level, expatriates considered it normal that English was the legitimized language in MNC subsidiaries and that, due to their higher-level positions, they could use HCEs for translation tasks, thus reducing the motivation to learn the host country language. In contrast, HCEs questioned the rationale of using only English, and they indicated dissatisfaction toward the additional burden of translation tasks. However, HCEs did sympathize with expatriates over the fact that fixed-term expatriation contracts did not motivate

expatriates to invest time and effort to learn the host country language on a continuous basis. At the national level, our study revealed that linguistic nationalism amongst HCEs was a complicating factor in demotivating expatriates' to learn the host country language. Expatriates were very concerned that host country nationals demonstrated negative emotions toward foreigners in China. Many expressed the view that perhaps it was time to leave China; therefore, they were not motivated to learn the host country language.

In sum, our study has provided a detailed and contextual account of individuals' motivation in second language acquisition. We hope that our inductively derived perspective of motivation and impediments for second language acquisition residing in the individual, organizational and national levels will inform future research on MNC employees' learning of host country language(s).

## 5.2. The impact of attitudes towards language learning and language proficiency on the expatriate-HCE relationship

The discrepancies identified in our study between the attitudes of expatriates and HCEs towards expatriates' learning of the host country language demonstrate that this is a sensitive issue in MNC subsidiaries. Expatriates' willingness to learn and adopt the host country language may thus potentially greatly enhance or harm expatriate-HCE relationships, as summarized in Fig. 2 below.

Current literature has informed us that by choosing one official language in a multilingual organization it is unavoidable that some members of the organization are more proficient than others in the

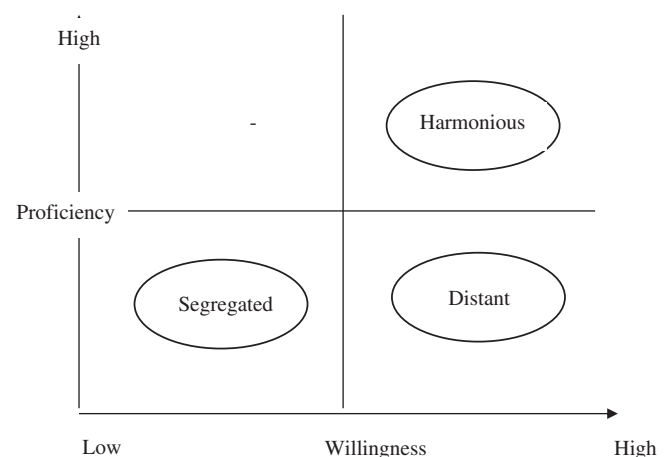


Fig. 2. Impact on expatriate-HCE.

official language (Janssens, Lambert, & Steyaert, 2004; Steyaert et al., 2011). In reality, often there is also more than one language spoken in a multilingual organization, and employees may choose languages in a functional manner, that is, taking a situated approach and changing language according to the language proficiency of the other party. Employees in MNCs may utilize multiple linguistic resources in complex ways to express their voice, which leads to a multilingual *franca* practice in contexts characterized by linguistic complexity, such as during expatriation or within global teams (Makoni & Pennycook, 2012; Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). However, as individuals have different linguistic resources available to them, particularly in the context of working in a foreign land, there is a varying degree of employee willingness to adopt and utilize a foreign functional language. A high proficiency in a foreign language and the need for social, economic, and career enhancements can increase willingness to adopt the foreign functional language (Bordia & Bordia, 2015).

English often serves as a functional language, a language which many employees can speak, in MNCs (Fredrikson, Barner-Rasmussen, & Piekkari, 2006). However, the status of English as the functional language becomes questionable in MNC subsidiaries when the majority of the employees actually speak the host country language. Employees' linguistic identity, which is reflected in the form of employees' mother tongue at the individual level, is important to them, and organizations need to value different mother tongues in subsidiaries (Bordia & Bordia, 2015). The mother tongue of the majority employees in MNC subsidiaries, that is, the host country language, is not a neutral entity, but rather an essential means to understand the local worlds and local employees (Ives, 2010). Employees' preference for using their mother tongue at workplaces has long been noted by scholars (e.g. Feely & Harzing, 2003). However, we still know little about the practice of a multilingual *franca*, including host country language, for example whether it is realistic to formalize a host country language as an additional corporate communication language in MNC subsidiaries.

Our empirical study has filled in this research gap by examining how strongly host country employee felt about using their mother tongue in MNC subsidiaries operating in their home country. Our findings demonstrated that depending on expatriates' willingness to learn the local language and their actual local language proficiency, the relationship between expatriates and HCEs ranged from harmonious through distant to segregated. When expatriates were willing to learn and were proficient in using the host country language, HCEs felt that they, as well as their home culture reflected in their mother tongue, were respected by expatriates and that they were not excluded in the business activities taking place at MNC subsidiaries. In this case, the relationship between expatriates and HCEs was harmonious in the sense that there was mutual respect and less tension between the two groups. With expatriates' ability to converse in the local language also came improved opportunities for them to build trust with their HCE colleagues. In contrast, when expatriates showed a willingness to learn, but did not demonstrate much use of the host country language either because of lack of proficiency or confidence or a combination of both, HCEs became suspicious and found it difficult to bond with expatriates. Similarly, expatriates also found it hard to trust their direct HCE reports as they controlled all the information exchange between expatriates and the rest of the HCEs. The relationship between expatriates and HCEs was thus distant. This finding confirms an earlier study with 25 Japanese firms in Australia (Okamoto & Teo, 2011), which describes the relationship between Japanese expatriates and local staff as 'distant' due to the expatriates' lack of English (host country language in this case) skills.

When expatriates show no sign that they cared about learning the host country language, and thus did not speak in the local language at all, HCEs became indifferent towards expatriates' suffering, that is, the fact that expatriates were excluded from both information access and activity participation. HCEs felt *entitled* not to be concerned about the segregation between themselves and expatriates. There was no common ground to begin establishing trust between expatriates and HCEs within such a segregated relationship. On the contrary, the expatriates' lack of willingness to learn the local language further contributed to the HCEs' feelings that expatriates considered themselves superior to them. Existing research from sociolinguistics has informed us that certain linguistic practices have been regarded as superior and others as inferior with regards to accent and pronunciation, particularly regarding different varieties of English (Jenkins, 2007; Giles, 1970). Native English speakers are considered to have a highly valued accent and are automatically given a powerful position compared to those who have to learn English as a second language (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). The findings of our study suggest that the superior-inferior dynamics also exist when two parties speak the shared *lingua franca* with varying levels of fluency. Nordic expatriates who are in general more fluent in English than Chinese HCEs were seen as putting themselves in a superior position by HCEs when they did not demonstrate willingness to learn and try to speak the local language.

Our findings thus revealed a subtle and fragile relationship between expatriates and HCEs in terms of trust-building via the HCEs' mother tongue and confirm earlier findings on trust formation as a language-sensitive process among group members from different cultures (Tenzer et al., 2013). Expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language is crucial for gaining trust from local staff, as the local language, the HCEs' mother tongue, can act as a strong bond. In contrast, speaking in English, as a result of expatriates' lack of host country language skills, creates a further barrier between expatriates and HCEs, quite apart from existing barriers such as ethnicity and the fact that the expatriates have not worked in the subsidiary before. In a recent study, Neeley (2013) found that an imposed corporate language caused non-native speakers to distrust native speakers, as they feared that native speakers might deceive them because of the non-native speakers' lower corporate language proficiency. The results of our study contribute to this line of enquiry by proposing that this is also true when both parties are non-native speakers, but one party has better corporate language skills.

However, quite apart from expatriates' *actual* proficiency in the host country language, we showed that their *willingness* to learn the language was equally crucial in terms of trust formation, as language, and in particular one's native language, is a symbol of specific ethnic and national identity (Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Sääntti, 2005). HCEs are sensitive not only to whether expatriates *can* speak their mother tongue, but also to expatriates' sincerity in learning their mother tongue, as this translated to acknowledging and showing respect for the HCEs' ethnic and national identity. Expatriates' lack of host country language skills can provoke discontent and resentment amongst local staff. Toh and DeNisi (2005) emphasized that in host countries such as China such negative emotions are especially visible when HCEs perceive no clear advantage of expatriates over the local employees with regard to work qualification, technical competence or experience. Expatriates' superior work skills may not become visible to the local staff in MNC subsidiaries when expatriates are unable to communicate directly with all HCEs, and communicating in English tends to weaken intended messages.



## 6. Limitations, suggestions for future research, and managerial implications

While our study has increased our knowledge of the role of host country language in MNC subsidiaries, there are several limitations that open up interesting avenues for future research. First, our study was conducted in a linguistically unique<sup>4</sup> country with generally low English proficiency, which limits the generalizability of the findings to MNC subsidiaries in other countries, especially outside East Asian countries such as Japan (Peltokorpi, 2010) and South Korea (Park, Hwang, & Harrison, 1996). However, even though the contextual uniqueness of our study makes the finding less generalizable, it nevertheless provides an opportunity for theory building that has a wider appeal. Second, we have not examined expatriates' actual host country language proficiency in great detail. Further studies could look in greater detail at the varying levels of language proficiency and the differential impact this has on expatriate adjustment and performance. Third, instead of taking a dual perspective, including both expatriates and HCEs, further studies could also focus more specifically on the under-researched host country national perspective, examining in depth how HCEs' English proficiency influences information exchange and interpersonal relationships between expatriates and HCEs. Fourth, gender and gendered power relationships are major defining features for most organizations, including in expatriate management (Hearn, Metcalfe & Piekkari, 2006; Hearn, Metcalfe, & Piekkari, 2012). Given that most of the expatriates in this study were male, the findings and conclusions could potentially be different for female expatriates.

When moving abroad for international assignments, expatriates inevitably face the dilemma of whether to invest time into learning the host country language and, if so, how much effort they should make in becoming fully proficient. By addressing this real-life dilemma, our paper has several important practical implications. Most importantly, our empirical findings emphasize the importance of the host country language in achieving a harmonious expatriate-HCE relationship. We recommend expatriates to demonstrate a willingness to learn the mother tongue of their HCE colleagues during their expatriation, even if they might not be able to achieve the goal of being able to converse in the local language for work purposes. MNCs are recommended to encourage the parallel use of host country languages, in addition to the corporate *lingua franca*. MNCs could consider incorporating the host country language as the second official language for the subsidiary, especially when there is a high degree of localization in the business operations of the MNC subsidiary.

Second, our study suggests that MNCs need to recognize host country languages as unique and useful skills for expatriates. Before sending an expatriate to work in a subsidiary abroad, we recommend that MNCs evaluate whether he/she is motivated to learn the host country language. We further recommend that MNCs spend time and effort on expatriates' host country language learning before and during the expatriation, as well as make it a common practice to provide host country language training to expatriates on a long-term basis. The length of expatriate assignments, as well as the time needed to learn the host country language, also needs to be taken into consideration when designing the specific job package for an expatriate.

Third, given the reality that it requires a great amount of effort to fully master a second language at adulthood, it is unrealistic to expect interactions between expatriates and HCEs to take place

only in the host country language. Employees working in MNCs therefore need to be mindful and perseverant when they communicate in English with colleagues who might speak the corporate *lingua franca* with a different accent. It would be ideal if both expatriates and HCEs were able to learn more about how their counterpart's native language influence their use of the corporate *lingua franca*, so that they can avoid misunderstandings because of accents and sentence structures. Finally, we would also recommend using simple and clear sentence structures with repetition in communicating in the *lingua franca*, especially during occasions when conversations take place in hectic and chaotic surroundings.

Fourth, by emphasizing the importance of the host country language, we also recommend the parallel use of local languages (Steyaert et al., 2011) and functional multilingualism, which means employing a variety of available languages (Hagen, 1999). The inclusion of host country language(s) in both the daily business operations and the interactions between expatriates and HCEs is a concrete step towards adopting functional multilingualism (Feely & Harzing, 2003). Voices from HCEs in our study suggest that a more proactive managerial approach to language management is needed, legitimizing the role of host country language(s) in MNC subsidiaries, in addition to the current informal practice of allowing the use of local languages to emerge and evolve on their own.

## 7. Conclusions

There is a growing literature on language in IB, and in particular on the solutions to overcome language barriers in cross-border operations. However, our paper is one of the first to focus on the contribution of the host country language in improving the relationship between expatriates and local employees in MNC subsidiaries. Our paper is also one of the first to include a sufficient number of local voices, demonstrating how HCEs viewed expatriates' learning of their mother tongue.

Drawing upon a fine-grained analysis of 70 interviews with both expatriates and their HCE colleagues, we presented an inductively built process model explaining what the motivators and constraints are for expatriates regarding learning the local language, and how their willingness and actual proficiency in the host country language impact upon the expatriate-HCE relationship. In doing so, we uncovered strongly discrepant views held by expatriates and HCEs toward these motivators and constraints for expatriates, thus demonstrating the need for more research representing local employees' voices in IB.

We further analyzed the sensitive relationship between expatriates' willingness to learn the host country language and the expatriate-HCE relationship by providing clear empirical evidence of the resulting harmonious, distant or separated relationships that may result, as well as the varying degree of superior-inferior power relationship between the two parties. Furthermore, the role of host country language in trust formation has been alluded to but, prior to our study, not examined in detail in a particular host country context.

In sum, our paper has provided an important contribution to knowledge on the role of host country language on expatriate-HCE relationships and opens up opportunities for further research into the crucial role of language in MNC subsidiaries.

## Acknowledgement

Open access for this article was funded by King's College London.

<sup>4</sup> "Linguistically unique" means Mandarin Chinese is not the official language of other countries (with the exception of Taiwan, which has Taiwanese Mandarin as its official language).



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